

MUSIC

Review: Brooklyn Youth Chorus Explores Issues Facing Its Members

By CORINNA da FONSECA-WOLLHEIM MAY 15, 2017

Viewed from the outside, a choir is a unit, a multitude acting as one. But over the past year, the Brooklyn Youth Chorus has gone out of its way to pry open the unified facade and examine internal differences. On Friday at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, it presented a resulting work, “Silent Voices,” an evening-long choral exploration of some of the big issues troubling the ensemble’s young members: race, gender, socioeconomic inequality and gentrification, among others.

The chorus is well placed for such an undertaking. Since its founding 25 years ago by its indefatigable artistic director, Dianne Berkun Menaker, it has given voice to children and young adults from a wide range of backgrounds. Musically, too, it fosters diversity with a targeted training program that teaches choristers to sing in a variety of styles and sounds. Typical members of the chorus’s professional-level concert ensemble know how to shade their voices to sound idiomatically pop, classical or gospel. This project asked: “What is your own voice? And what is it you need to say?”

The sung and spoken texts for “Silent Voices” came from many sources, including chorus members; contemporary authors, such as the legal rights activist Michelle Alexander; and historical figures like Eleanor Roosevelt. Eight composers wrote new material: Jeff Beal, Mary Kouyoumdjian, Paul Miller (DJ Spooky), Nico Muhly, Shara Nova, Toshi Reagon, Kamala Sankaram and Caroline Shaw. The chameleonlike International Contemporary Ensemble added instrumental texture.

At times, the music lagged behind the message. Texts that were provocative or moving were sometimes set to music that was oblique and bland. This was especially the case with some of Mr. Beal’s all too harmonious settings of lines by Pauli Murray, a black lesbian civil rights activist and correspondent of Roosevelt’s. Her courage to hurl herself against multiple constraints — “Freedom lures us down a trail of skulls where men forever crush the dreamers” — seems to call for more forcefully angular music.

A touching spoken declaration by a white teenage member of the chorus about the responsibility of privilege was followed by Shara Nova’s “Blind to the Illness,” which seemed to encase the same sentiments in a melancholic bubble.

By contrast, Ms. Shaw’s “so quietly” offered a striking unity of sound and meaning. This a cappella work is set to a text of her own that chronicles a halting progression toward greater eloquence from self-effacing fragments like,

Maybe maybe
Never you mind I
Maybe I could
If you maybe
Could

to the joyously assertive final verse, “I’m gonna be/ever singing.”

Using novel vocal techniques, including sharp, rhythmic breathwork, the music expresses at the most cellular level a process of voice-finding and courage-building. (It also demonstrated the enormous versatility and polish of these young singers.)

A vast majority of those in the concert ensemble are girls, and the passages dedicated to body image and gender expectations felt urgent and true. Mr. Muhly’s “Advice to a Young Woman,” using a 17th-century guide to manners, juxtaposed a section of watchful music with a free-spinning canon.

In the final numbers, an irrepressible optimism came through, beginning with Ms. Reagon’s “Building Brooklyn,” alive with bluesy harmonies and a sticky groove. For Ms. Nova’s “Let Freedom Ring,” the aisles flooded with singers from the chorus’s younger divisions. (Some 500 students take part in the organization’s programs.) Their fresh voices not only boosted the choral sound in this finale, but also served as a reminder that a new generation is already impatient to take the stage and make itself heard.